

Eastern or Central? Tracing Poland's Place in the American Literary Representations and Cultural Discourses on Europe.

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The question posed in the title of this paper arises at the intersections between geopolitics and imagination. Ever since the publication of Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* in 1994, vibrant research into the *mental mapping* of the region has been exploring the forces and narratives behind the process of amalgamating individual countries into "mental rubrics" (Wolff) and pitting them against others to reflect the existing balance of power—both political and cultural. Arguably, it was especially during the post-war communist rule in Europe that the connotations of peripherality accrued to the term "Eastern Europe." Often used interchangeably with the term "Eastern Bloc," *Eastern Europe* was perceived as a charged and pejorative label by such intellectuals as Milan Kundera or Czesław Miłosz, who contrasted it with the cultural category of *Central Europe* to evoke the common cultural heritage of the Sovietized nations and thus protest against the enforced relegation of their part of Europe to the *East*, that is Soviet Russia. In this paper, I attempt to explore Poland's place within these *imaginative geographies* (Said 54) of the region by looking at selected American texts and discourses from the second-half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century to trace the evolution which this place has undergone as a result of the transformations in the political landscape. While it is "Eastern Europe," rather than "Central Europe," or the more neutral "East-Central Europe," that remains the term of choice in the American media coverage and scholarship on the region, I argue that the post-communist transitions and, much more recently, Russia's annexation of Crimea and then the war on Ukraine, but also internal political changes within individual countries of the region, have effectively shifted the kaleidoscope of connotations and meanings which *Eastern Europe* now evokes, thus influencing also the place which Poland occupies within this rubric.

Works cited

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